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Disability Sport and Activist Identities: A Qualitative Study of Narratives of Activism Among Elite Athletes' with Impairment

Abstract

Objectives: Sport and exercise psychology has recently expanded into how it can be utilized to enable social missions like activism. No research, however, has examined activist identities among disabled, elite athletes. This article is the first to engage with this new and complex issue by examining narratives of activism amongst elite athletes with impairment and their adoption/rejection of various activist identities. **Methods**: Thirty-six people were recruited using maximum variation and criterion-based purposive sampling strategies. Data was collected using interviews and fieldwork observations (e.g., observation and social media material). The large data set was rigorously analyzed using a narrative thematic analysis. **Results**: All participants adopted an athletic identity and an athletic activist identity. A small group also adopted a political activist identity that was concerned with challenging disablism. The athletes' reasons for adopting or eschewing activist identities are identified and connections made to organizational stressors, interpellation, feeling, emotional regulation, narrative, habitus, health and wellbeing. Also revealed is the impact that sporting retirement had on activist identity construction. **Conclusions**: The article makes a novel research contribution by revealing two different activist identities within the context of disability sport and what social functions each identity might serve. It also significantly develops knowledge by revealing various organizational stressors experienced by disabled athletes, the importance of embodied feelings and emotional regulation in activist identity construction, the damage that social oppression can have on wellbeing following sporting retirement, and the positive possibilities retiring may have for developing different identities. Practical suggestions are as well offered.

Keywords: disability, para-sport, activist identity, narrative, affect, retirement

Disability Sport and Activist Identities: A Qualitative Study of Narratives of Activism Among Elite Athletes' with Impairment

Within the field of sport and exercise psychology, research on disability has grown in recent years. As part of this growth, attention has turned to elite athletes with impairment. For example, research has examined experiences of retirement (Wheeler, Malone, VanVlack, Nelson, & Steadward, 1996), mental skills use (Martin & Malone, 2013), posttraumatic growth (Day, 2013), and autonomy supportive coaching (Cheon, Reeve, Lee & Lee, 2015) among elite, disabled athletes. Research also exists on athletic identity, that is, the degree to which a disabled individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). Along with work on the athletic role in recreational sport (e.g., Perrier, Smith, Strachan & Latimer-Cheung, 2012; Tasiemski & Brewer, 2011), research has examined the relationship between athletic identity and self-esteem among elite, disabled athletes (Vliet, Van Biesen & Vanlandewijck, 2008), the effect of sports participation on athletic identity and influence on quality of life (Groff, Lundberg & Zabriskie, 2009) and the role of para-sport in the construction of disabled and athletic identities (Peers, 2012).

Whilst disability specific research within sport and exercise psychology is a growing field, significant gaps in knowledge remain (Smith, Martin & Perrier, 2016). One gap pertains to activist orientations or *activist identities* among elite athletes with impairment. Activist identity is broadly defined as an individual's developed, relatively stable, yet changeable orientation to engage in social missions (Corning & Myers, 2002). It involves collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviors that range from low-risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviors that convey what is seen is needed to make a better society (Corning & Myers, 2002).

Thus, individuals with an activist identity are often advocates in the sense that they seek change for the better within society (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015; Stake & Rosu, 2012).

Examining activist identities among disabled, elite athletes' is of significance for several reasons. As Schinke et al., (2016) have noted, "there is growing interest in how sport psychology practices and sport contexts can be crafted to enable social missions" (p. 4) and more generally how the field might be utilized to benefit human activity. For example, in position statements and ethical principles, organisations like the *International Society of Sport Psychology* (ISSP) and the *Applied Association of Sport Psychology* (AASP) have promoted social missions and called on sport and exercise psychologists to actively contribute to human welfare by condoning discriminatory practices, promoting diversity, and enabling social justice (Schinke et al., 2016). Despite this, it has been argued that too few researchers in sport and exercise psychological research explicitly focus on social missions, such as promoting diversity, tackling oppression, and examining activism (Fisher & Roper, 2015; Krane, 2014; Smith & Perrier, 2014). Examining activist identities among sports people is also of significance as athletes themselves might make a valuable contribution to promoting social missions. This is because athletes are potentially well positioned to vividly highlight injustice both within and outside sport. For example, over the years various athletes have engaged in activism by shining a spotlight on issues such as racism, LGBT rights (Krane, 2014), and, in relation to disability, inaccessible sporting programs for disabled people (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015).

A focus on activist identities is therefore important. It contributes to how the field of sport and psychology might be utilized to benefit human activity and social life. Despite this, there is a lack of empirical work within the field on activist identities in relation to disabled, elite athletes. Designed to address the aforementioned gaps in knowledge, the purpose of this paper is to examine narratives of activism among elite

athletes' with impairment and their adoption and/or rejection of possible activist identities. Our central research questions were: 1) What types of activist identities, if any, are constructed and performed by elite athletes' with a disability and for what do they advocate? 2) Why, or why not, is an activist identity pertinent to them? 3) How and when do they engage in activism? 4) What social functions might their discourses serve in terms of disability, social missions and wellbeing?

Theoretically, the research is informed by narrative inquiry. Joining with approaches like symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and discursive psychology, and as also shown in discourse orientated work within sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb & Kettler, 2013; McGannon & Spence, 2012), narrative inquiry considers language to be constructive. That is to say, stories constitute our psychological realities, including identity (McGannon & Smith, 2015). For narrative scholars, identity is not something an individual 'has' inside them and which emerges from their mind. Rather identities are constructed within social relations primarily through talk (Nelson, 2001; Frank, 2010). As part of this relational and discursive constructive process, identity is performed, which means that people enact identities through their talk (Cosh et al., 2013; McGannon & Spence, 2012). In addition to our identities being constructed and performed, research has shown that language is performative (Cosh et al., 2012; Smith, 2013; Wiggins & Potter, 2008). In other words, and echoing classic formulations of philosophical speech-act theory, stories, accounts, and others forms of discourse *do* things; our talk is action-orientated. Language-in-use then is neither passive nor a neutral medium of representing thoughts, attitudes, emotions, or behavior. Rather storied language acts in, for, and on us, affecting our thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and behavior (Frank, 2010). Thus, as Atkinson (2015) argued, researchers must always "have due regard for the fact that language accomplishes social actions and realities" (p. 93). Or,

as Wiggins and Potter (2008) put it, "to separate talk and action as psychologists commonly do (for example in distinctions such as attitudes vs. behavior) is to set up a false dichotomy, and to overlook the ways in which talk achieves things in itself" (p. 77).

Methodology and Methods

The research design was rigorously developed and implemented in the following manner.

Methodology and Sampling

The research was underpinned by ontological relativism (i.e., reality is multiple, created, and mind-dependent) and epistemological constructionism (i.e., knowledge is constructed and subjective). After gaining university ethical approval for the study, participants were recruited through maximum variation and criterion-based purposive sampling strategies (Smith & Sparkes, 2014). The combination of two types of purposive sampling was chosen because the former ensures the representation of a variety of Paralympic sports and athletes' experiences. The latter sampling strategy ensured that participants were recruited who shared particular inclusion criteria attributes. The criteria were people a) aged 18 years or over b) with impairment and c) who were an actively competitive elite athlete. An elite athlete was defined as someone who had participated in elite talent programs, were in receipt of an Athlete Performance Award from UK Sport during their para-sport careers, competed at high level events like the World Championships or Paralympics, and/or have experienced some sustained success at the highest level (Swann, Moran & Piggott, 2015).

To recruit a sample, calls for participants were placed on social media and websites, and letters were sent to disability sport networks inviting people who met the sampling criteria to take part in the study. The study was described as research that sought to understand people's experiences of being a disabled athlete. Participants were not then

informed about the specific topic of this research. The reason for this was based on the need to recruit a diverse sample whilst avoiding recruiting a group of people who might first consider the research an opportunity to promote disability sport or their personal political views. Recruitment of participants continued until data saturation was achieved. Recognizing the complexities of data saturation (e.g. there is always the potential for 'the new to emerge') (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013), this kind of saturation best refers to an iterative process that involves collecting and transcribing initial data, immediately assessing it, and then continuing to collect and assess data until anything 'new' found adds nothing necessarily to the overall story and patterns. The result was a recruited sample of 36 people (20 males and 16 females aged between 23 and 40 years) who had been competing in their sport for an average of 8 years. The participants reported a range of impairments (e.g., amputation, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury, visual impairment) and represented a diversity of sports (e.g., athletics, canoe, cycling, swimming, triathlon, wheelchair basketball). Nine individuals described their impairments as congenital or acquired during childhood and 27 acquired their impairments in adulthood. The sample was also diverse in terms of income and employment status.

Data Collection

Data was collected using qualitative methods synchronously, resulting in a large and qualitatively rich data set. All participants were involved in a semi-structured life story interview. Each interview was recorded and lasted on average 2 hours. In each interview, the interviewer invited each participant to tell stories about their own life and how it had been lived over time. An interview guide was also used to help facilitate discussion. Questions included in the guide were, "Can you tell me about your sporting experiences?", "Can you describe who you are?", "What does activism mean to you" and "Can you describe any experiences you've had of engaging in activism". Clarification,

elaboration, and detail orientated probes, that is, curiosity-driven follow-up questions were used throughout to elicit richer data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). One year after the first interview, people in the sample who had retired from competitive sport were interviewed again. The rationale for a second interview with this group was based on the view that retirement from elite sport might be a major epiphany that engenders reflection and possible change in identity and wellbeing. Eight participants retired during the project and were interviewed on average for 1.5 hours. All data were transcribed verbatim and participants given pseudonyms.

Concurrently with the interviews, 70 hours of observational data was collected in various contexts. For example, gym training (e.g., weights sessions or aerobic training in the gym), training camps in which players met, ate together, practiced skills, discussed tactics, played sport and so on, team meetings, interactions in cafés with team mates and friends, and time spent in a family home were observed. Data were recorded either in situ or later that day using fieldnotes. The method of observation was chosen because it allows the researcher insight into the mundane, the typical, and occasionally extraordinary features of everyday life that a participant might not feel worth commenting on in an interview (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). Moreover, combining observational data with interview data enables researchers to understand not just what a participant says they do, but also what they do in everyday life (Atkinson, 2015). In addition to these 'real world' observations, the authors were also attentive to the virtual and digital sites where athletes with disabilities show and perform identities (Bundon, 2016). Throughout the project, social media accounts (e.g. Twitter) and blogs produced by athletes were also observed and provided a supplementary source of material.

Data Analysis and Validity

Transcripts, fieldnotes and collected digital media were subjected to an inductive

thematic narrative analysis as described by Riessman (2008) and Smith (2016). Initially, the authors engaged in indwelling, which involves immersing oneself in the data, thinking with stories, and generating initial ideas. Next, narrative themes - a pattern that runs through a story - were identified by theme-ing the data, which means systematically coding stories for manifest and latent meaning. Themes were then reviewed against the entire data set before these were refined and combined into larger themes that captured complex patterns that run through stories. This process led to the emergence of 4 main narrative themes, and the initial naming of these.

The study was guided by a relativist approach to conceptualizing validity in qualitative research (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2014). This approach does not mean that 'anything goes'. Rather, it means that criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research are drawn from an ongoing list of characterizing traits as opposed to being applied in a universal manner to all qualitative research. The criteria for enhancing the quality of the work here included the following: the worthiness of the topic; the significant contribution of the work; rich rigor (e.g., developing a sample appropriate for the purpose of the study and generating data that could provide for meaningful and significant claims); and the coherence of the research, which refers to how well the study coheres in terms of the purpose, methods, and results. Participant reflections on our analytical interpretations were also utilized, not in an effort to achieve theory-free knowledge, but rather to open up dialogue about the fairness, appropriateness and believability of the results shared. A reflexive diary was kept in order to critically reflect on, for example, prior assumptions held about disability, sport, and activism, and ongoing judgments about the data and interpretations of these. An audit trail in which two colleagues, acting as 'critical friends' (Smith & Sparkes, 2012), independently scrutinized data collection was additionally used. Critical friends were also used to provide a

theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations as these emerged in relation to the data (Burke, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2012).

Results

The results are presented as follows. The theme of a sporting activist identity that all participants adopted is first highlighted. A second activist identity concerned with challenging social oppression outside sport is then revealed. Emphasized next are the barriers to constructing and performing political activist identities. Thereafter retirement and the development of a new identity about political activism are attended to. The article concludes by addressing the contribution of the research, suggesting what each identity might do, and offering practical implications.

Sporting Activist Identities

All participants identified strongly with the athlete identity. Each also constructed and performed what we termed a sporting activist identity. Defined, this is a type of identity that advocates for change *inside* sport for the purpose of transforming policy, practices, and organizations that are believed to restrict ones own *individual* or *team* sporting success. In addition to advocating for a consistent, fair, correct, and clearly communicated classification policy system (the system by which athletes with disabilities are ‘classified’ into different competitive categories based on their type of impairment and/or functional abilities), what people with a sporting type of activist identity mainly advocated for was a reduction of perceived inequalities between what able-bodied athletes received and what disabled athletes received. The perceived inequalities, often emerging from within organizations or the material environment, included restricted disabled parking and limited accessible accommodation close to training locations, a lack of disability specific sport equipment, minimal and precarious financial support to train and

compete, and limited access to high quality coaches and sport science services (particularly those with disability-specific awareness and knowledge). Moreover, such perceived inequalities emerging from within the material environment and organizations were deemed a stressor by the participants that could negatively impact upon their preparation for major competitions, sporting success, emotions, and health and wellbeing. As one female athlete said in response to being asked 'What does activism mean to you':

> Activism for me is all about getting equality in sport. As an athlete my goal ultimately is to win, and to be the best I can. But sometimes it feels as though I can't do this. That's not down to me. It's the fault of so many things external to me, like the failure of the [name of] organization to come up with good training facilities, parking, the lack of good coaches that understand my needs and what being a Paralympian is all about. But I don't accept the inequalities between what we have and what Olympic, able-bodied have. You see it's a huge stress that impacts on my training, what I could really do in sport, and effects even my health and moods…Inequalities are wrong and really stressful, but I don't take it lying down. I won't tolerate now how some people in sport treat us. I know a lot of other para-athletes think like this too, that we get a raw deal and more needs to be done to shrink the gaps between us and Olympic athletes. That's a big mission, but I believe in it. (Helen)

How athletes responded to perceived inequalities in sport, and the stress that inequality could engender, was by sometimes engaging in acts of activism that they themselves perceived to be high-risk. This included demanding change at team meetings and via social media in confrontational ways. What was largely perceived to be at stake for the participants by engaging in such risky acts of activism was the withdrawal of emotional (e.g. trust), tangible (e.g. financial assistance), and informational (e.g. advice)

social support from coaches or team management. What the participants were also risking was a rise in stress that came with the fear of having social support withdrawn. Notwithstanding such risks and stressors, how athletes mostly performed activist identities was by engaging in occasional, low-risk, gentle, and institutionalized activist acts. For example, the participants spoke with other athletes as well as sport staff (coaches, team mangers, and performance lifestyle coordinators), about perceived inequalities and about how reducing these gaps in equality would improve their individual or team performance.

I: You spoke about trying to make changes in sport. Can you tell me how you've gone about this?

Male participant: Not in an aggressive manner. I'd be out of the team I reckon if I did. You see, being a para-athlete comes with many challenges. Many though are not of our own making. For me, and others I know, there is great pressure to perform and get medals, but I'm having to battle to get things in place to do this. Para-athletes don't get the same environment as able-bodied athletes and sometimes the disparities between us feel so wrong because we could do so much better if we had the same as them. I know I could…I'm not saying I can change the world of para-sport here. I'm not naïve. But I can do my little bit. I've spoken up at training camps about how bad our food is, I've pushed for competitions that treat us as good as able-bodied athletes, and said we need the same access to sport science support…Still, when you do speak up there are risks, like thinking, if I tell the coach to stop patronizing me, will he just walk away or not give his all. So mostly I'm like, yes this is wrong, things need improving, but I don't go overboard. There's too much to lose, and it's emotionally quite draining I reckon too. So I'm more like, I go about things in a gentler, subtle manner, wanting to

make change but not upset the apple cart. (Harry)

Whilst all the participants constructed and performed a sporting activist identity by advocating for change inside sport, there were important differences amongst them in terms of where they discursively positioned 'athlete' in their identity hierarchy. Whilst Paralympians are, *de facto*, individuals with a disability else they would be ineligible to compete at the Paralympic Games, 29 of the participants rejected the term disability to describe themselves, preferring instead to define themselves as simply an athlete. The participants described themselves using this 'athlete only identity discourse' partly as a way to legitimate their athletic status, competence, and talents as a sportsperson. For example, one participant in an interview said:

Female participant: I think of myself as an athlete, not as a woman, and certainly not as disabled.

I: Why is that?

Female participant: I am 100% an athlete, that's who I am, totally. I train hard, I lift weights, I cover hundreds of miles, go out in all weathers…I am an athlete, and want to be seen as one, not disabled, but an athlete outright, a winner. I don't even think of myself as disabled. I'm a Paralympian and for me that is all about being an athlete, not disability. (Emma)

Observational data further highlighted the dominance of an 'athlete only identity discourse' within the sample.

During team meetings, when speaking with the media, on his twitter account, and in conversations with the general public it has become apparent that James views himself as just an athlete. Sometimes he was often at pains to stress this. On several occasions, like observed today when he responded on twitter to a tweet, he stressed that, to quote, he 'did not see himself as disabled' and was 'an athlete just

like any other elite athlete who competes at elite level.' (James - observational field notes)

In contrast to the majority of participants who used athlete only identity language, 7 people in the study, who came from a range of sports and had different impairments that were either congenital or acquired, described themselves as a 'disabled athlete'. Identifying as a disabled person first and then an athlete second did not though mean that the participant's identification with an athletic identity was weak or diminished. Rather, they identified strongly with the athlete role but preferred to position disability first within their identity hierarchy to emphasize an affirmative identity. As described by Swain and French (2000), an affirmative identity refers to a positive identity as a person who is proud to be disabled, finds benefits in living life with a disability, and wishes to affirm a connection with other people who have an impairment. Participants also adopted the discourse of a 'disabled athlete' to as a way to counter negative discourses of disability, including those that depict disabled people simply as vulnerable, dependent, pitiful, tragic victims, or not 'normal'.

I: How would you describe yourself?

Male participant: I'm disabled, and that defines me. I'd describe myself as a disabled athlete, in that order. I'm an athlete, for sure. But I'm more than an athlete. I'm first and foremost a disabled person...Disability isn't just about me, my body, or Paralympic sport, or winning a medal. It's political because when you're disabled society often treats you like a second-class citizen, as if being disabled is a horrible, abnormal thing, and we should be grateful for help or pity. That's wrong. It needs challenging, and if I can use my status as an athlete to do this, to bring disability rights to people's attention, then that's as good as any gold medal…I'm proud to be disabled. I'm disabled and then an athlete, a disabled

athlete. Unfortunately I don't see too many of us about in sport like this. (Mark)

Political Activist Identity

The majority of the participants confined activist behaviors to advocating for change inside sport. However, the 7 participants who described themselves as a 'disabled athlete' did engage in activism both inside and outside sport. In so doing, they constructed and performed another identity, what we termed a political activist identity. Defined, a political activist identity refers to a type of identity that advocates for change *outside* sport for the purpose of resisting and transforming discourses, attitudes, non-verbal acts, policies, and environmental structures that socially oppress people in their everyday lives. Accordingly, this type of activist identity is different to an athletic activist identity in that activist acts are conducted outside of the sporting context. Moreover, what these actions were directed at challenging was disablism, not for reasons to do with sporting performance, but rather to collectively improve the everyday lives of disabled people. Disablism refers to the social oppression disabled people encounter (Goodley, 2016). It involves the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their physical health and psychological or subjective wellbeing (Thomas, 2014). As one female participant said:

> Being a disabled athlete is a privilege in many ways. When you really look outside sport and the comfortable life it gives you, what you see is unfortunately a lot of misery and difficulties for disabled people. None of it our fault, very little anyway. The problems largely fall at the door of society, for not thinking we can excel at work, for not adapting buildings, people staring at disabled people when they shop in a supermarket, a lack of accessible transport, bad stadiums, welfare cuts, cruel jokes, and even physical violence. The list goes on. When you step outside of sport you hear all about the damage being done to disabled people and get to

> experience it first hand. It's wrong. It's oppressive. People can't enjoy gyms, get a job, struggle to watch their football team, or even afford to buy healthy food or live in a house that meets their needs. People are suffering, that's the reality of it. And if I can use my identity as an athlete to help change things, I will and do. I'm proud of being an athlete, and have a very strong identity as a political disabled athlete too. This didn't happen overnight though. It was a while before I felt the calling. (Rachel)

There were various reasons why the 7 participants constructed and performed a political activist identity. Five participants began the process of developing this kind of identity prior to being an elite athlete and 2 when competing at athletes, partly as a result being interpellated to activism. Interpellation is the social constitutive process where individuals are "hailed"—called—to acknowledge and respond to ideologies to be certain individuals' as subjects (Frank, 2010). The people in this study were interpellated to take up an activist political identity by at least two embodied, socialized, and relational forces: one of affect and feeling and one of narrative. As part of the affective turn, it has been argued that we are *feeling bodies* and act on how we *feel* (Burkitt, 2014; Cromby, 2015; Damasio, 1994). That is, we feel various embodied intensities, sensations, directions, desires, and valences corporeally and these feelings, provided for us by our bodies, can impel us to certain identities that have been called out. For example, participants explained that they took up political activist identities partly because of their 'gut feelings', what Damasio (1994) theorized as affective somatic markers for informing identity identification and guiding behavior. Likewise, why the interpellation to take up an activist political identity had force was because the participant's *felt* they must respond to a call made their own body.

> I: You've said a lot that you're, to use your words, 'a disabled activist who is also

very much an athlete'. Are there any reasons why you were drawn to activism?

Male participant: There are a few. This might sound strange, but it was a feeling, deep inside me that told me it was wrong to ignore the injustices I heard about and saw were happening when I stepped outside of sport…The only way I can explain my initial decision to be an activist was that it felt wrong knowing what happens to disabled people and I knew, in my body by how I suddenly felt, that I should do something. I had to. If I ignored that feeling, what person would I be? (Matthew)

Of course, people can refuse interpellation and avoid taking on board a political activist identity they have been called by their corporeal feelings to adopt. But, this was not the case for the 7 people. Reasons for this relate to an embodied narrative enculturation and socialization process that involved first being *inducted* to a story of oppression that soon acted on them as a *subjectifier* by arousing *imagination*, offering a new *narrative map* and *connecting* people, and then over time, the stories that acted on and for them formed a *narrative habitus* around a political activist identity. Specifically, whilst "language interpellates or 'calls out' feeling, organizing experience in accord with regimes of discourse" (Cromby, 2015, p. 101), people also require access to certain discourses in order to help inform them, in the sense of providing information, about political activist identities. In other words, in order to know about activist identities they needed to be introduced to stories of activism, what might be termed *narrative induction*. A key way in which they were inducted to discourses about activism was by hearing stories from other disabled people outside of sport about oppression and the damage disablism can do. Being introduced to these stories not only helped organize and make sense of their embodied feelings. The stories moreover helped perform the work of identity *subjectification*, that is, "telling people who they ought to be, who they might like to be and who they can be" (Frank, 2006, p. 430).

Whilst a story as a subjectifier does not determine people as individuals can reject stories as not for them, the participants did get caught up in political stories, and these left their mark. A reason for this lies in the capacities that, according to Frank (2010), equip narratives to have the effects they have. For the participants, stories aroused their *imagination* by making the unseen not only visible but also emotionally compelling. Stories as subjectifiers further had the capacity to provide what Pollner and Stein (1996) termed a *narrative map*. Narrative maps are guides that experienced people offer to newcomers who are at a gateway to an unfamiliar world. As a map, the stories people share provide orientation, information and advice about how to navigate a new social world and the negotiation of new identities in unfamiliar situations (Pollner & Stein, 1996). Moreover for the participants, stories had the capacity to *connect* them with other people who performed activist identities. In so doing, the stories brought multiple actors together to produce a collective story of activism and a network of activists, thereby enhancing the force of narratives to call and capture people's imagination (Frank, 2010). As one female athlete put it:

> Sport is very insular. But for me I felt anger when I heard what is happening to disabled people who don't have the luxury of being in sport. There are problems in sport, don't get me wrong, and which I'm happy to protest about. But the big issue is what is going on out there. When I was introduced to other disabled people, it was like a wake-up call. I knew in my body something was wrong, and as well people were telling me so many stories about the horrors they were going through and how together we could do something. They opened my eyes to a new world and I wanted to be part of their cause, and fight for the rights of disabled people….When I heard all these stories about how disabled people are badly treated in society it got me angry, very emotional, and I couldn't help but imagine

> that could be me. Now I feel as though this political side is part of me, that it's important to who I am, it's engrained in me. I suppose you might say that it's in my veins now. I don't hesitate to tell someone now if they are being prejudiced against disabled people, write an email to MP [Member of Parliament], or pipe up when I hear people say disabled people are a drain on society. It's natural now to act like this. (Janice)

As suggested above, over time stories of oppression and activism that the participants first heard, provided information, aroused imagination, and connected them with other people who engaged in activism, turned into an embodied companion to tacitly guide and predispose actions by becoming part of their *narrative habitus*. This type of habitus (Frank, 2010) refers to the embedding of stories in bodies to hear certain stories, immediately and intuitively, as belonging to one's body and self. As Frank (2010) put it, although narrative habitus is never determinism, it is "a disposition to hear some stories as those one ought to listen to, ought to repeat on appropriate occasions, and ought to be guided by" (p. 53). It describes the embodied sense of attraction, indifference, or repulsion that people feel in response to stories which leads them to define some story as for us or not for us. Narrative habitus, therefore, "is the unchosen force in any choice to be interpellated by a story, and the complementary rejection of the interpellation that other stories would effect if a person were caught up in them" (p. 53). Another example of the participant's narrative habitus that predisposed them to be called to stories of activism can be seen in the following comments from a male participant (Ken): "I'm political. I'm not sure I'd be allowed to have it any other way, well, that's how it feels. And of course, all this dictates what I do. It's natural for me now to challenge discrimination and give my voice to campaigns to make life better for disabled people."

How and when the participants performed a political activist identity in

predisposed ways was diverse. For example, using their platform in sport as a vehicle to help counter disablism in society, they purposefully shared stories about the damage done to disabled people in society and what might be done to change this with other athletes who they perceived to be widely unaware of how widespread oppression was. Notably this process, they claimed, helped change some athletes' views and narratively inducted them into a political activist identity. Participants would also challenge people they encountered in public places, like in the street, shop, or gym, for suggesting that all disabled people are vulnerable, pitiful, and/or welfare 'scroungers'. Other ways how participants sought to resist disablism and improve disabled peoples' lives was by writing to their local Member of Parliament, signing petitions, producing blogs or tweets, engaging in organized protest rallies, and confronting senior people in organizations to demand oppressive policies and structures, like inaccessible environments, were changed.

> Observing Edward train in the gym today. Whilst I was helping put away some weights, I watched him chat with another male gym member. "Yes, I'm training for the Paralympics. I'm a disabled athlete," he responded to a question asking if he was a Paralympian. Following a short conversation about how great sport was and that he'd won a medal at the last Paralympics, he said to the person, "One thing you should know is that I had to fight hard to get access to this weights area. People didn't want me here. Bad for business I was told. But I wouldn't let it go. I fought it and here I am. But compared to most disabled people, I have it easy. I've left a petition about welfare cuts at the front desk. If you've the time please read it, and hopefully you'll support us." An hour later I watched as the young man read and signed the petition…Edward later sent a tweet about the cuts and why he believed these were dangerous for disabled people. (Edward - observational field notes)

Barriers and risks to constructing and performing political activist identities

There were two main reasons as to why the majority of participants did not construct political activist identities. Although disabled people still regularly face disablism in society (Goodley, 2016), most people in the study assumed that disabled people were now largely treated fairly, equally, and respectfully in society. Thus, it was reasoned that engaging in activism outside sport was largely needless. A second reason for the absence of a political activist identity was that it was presumed that, even if activism was truly needed, a political activist identity was incompatible with an athletic identity. For example, people thought their sport organizations and sponsors would be offended if they engaged in social justice issues outside of sport. As a result, they feared the withdrawal of funding, endorsements, or sponsorship that was necessary for maintaining a strong athletic role. In addition, it was presumed that engaging in activism would engender negative emotions that would negatively impact on their athletic identity due to the need for repeated emotional self-regulation – "the use of automatic or deliberate strategies to initiate, maintain, modify or display one's own emotions" (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013, p. 738). For instance, performing a political activist identity during social interactions was assumed to require the management of emotions by deliberately inhibiting outward displays of emotion. Such an expressive suppression response-focused strategy for regulating emotions would, in turn, require significant coping efforts and consume cognitive resources, resulting in negative training, recovery, and performance outcomes (Wagstaff, Hanton & Fletcher, 2013).

I: Why do you say you've no interest in disability politics?

Female participant: I don't hear too many bad things happening to disabled people. So I guess there isn't much point in acting political. But even if there was, I suspect it would be too emotionally draining to get involved. That and you'd

> have to keep your emotions hidden. You can't bubble over in public. I couldn't afford any of that as an athlete...My focus and energy needs to be on training, going for a medal, which is about being an athlete, not wasting emotional energy on getting involved in political stuff and trying to keep my emotions in check. But as I say, I don't think disabled people have it bad now. (Hannah)

In contrast to the majority of participants who assumed acts of activism were a barrier or risk to the athlete role and associated peak performance, the small group of people who did construct and perform a political activist identity said they both strongly identified with an athletic identity and believed sporting achievement never suffered as result of their activism. This is not to say that engaging in activism was easy or straightforward initially for the 7 participants. When political views were expressed and oppression challenged they sometimes encountered anger, alienation, or hostility from sporting organizations, athletes, and the general public. This made it difficult to act effectively at first. Anger, alienation, or hostility could also engender negative emotions for the participant's, harming their wellbeing. That said, it was suggested that with experience they became competent at enacting political activist identities and, in turn, harm to wellbeing was very rare. One reason for this relates to their narrative habitus and use of certain emotional regulation strategies.

According to Frank (2010), "narrative habitus provides the *competence*" (p. 53) to use stories and perform identities. This is because with experience people develop a disposition to know, in the body and mostly tacitly, what acts fit which occasion, who wants to hear what activist story and when, and how others will react to a story that might be told to challenge oppression. Whilst never perfect or guaranteed, narrative habitus can thus enable knowing, as if one were on narrative automatic pilot, how to effectively perform political identities without serious negative impact on emotion during and after

interactions. Important in the process was the development of strategies for both emotional self-regulation and interpersonal emotional regulation – the "verbal and nonverbal actions which influence others' emotions" (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013, p. 738) - that over time became part of their habitus. For example, constituted from life experiences over a period of time participants used reappraisal strategies, such as altering their emotion experience by changing thoughts, to manage any potential negative interactions and emotions. Other useful positive strategies for regulating emotions that formed part of their habitus for communicating activist points effectively were humor, smiling, cue words to calm people down, and prosocial actions, like taking into consideration the needs of others (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013). As one male said:

> Challenging the problems, and the physical and psychological abuse disabled face is now second nature to me. I don't have to think about it. That wasn't always the case though. I had to learn to control my emotions and anticipate how other people might react to what I would say as it was a fine line between making them angry and getting my point across…Early on some people got me so angry that I blew up at them, which you learn doesn't help, and a few athletes started to ignore me. But eventually it all clicks in place and becomes natural. I know when to smile to take the heat out of someone now, make a joke to get my point across, or think, ok, this isn't going to work, change approach or leave it for later. (Martin)

Retirement and the development of a political activist identity

Eight athletes retired from playing sport competitively during the study. In interviews with them before they retired, none adopted a political activist identity whilst in sport. However, analysis of data collected one year following retirement from playing revealed that 7 of the 8 athletes now constructed and performed this type of identity. Several connected reasons were suggested for constructing a new identity. Whereas the

one participant who did not construct a political activist identity returned to sport in a coaching capacity, the other seven left sport completely. They reflected that sport largely buffered them from the everyday realities disabled people in society generally face. When they retired from sport the participants were however no longer buffered. As a result, they soon began to personally experience and witness profound disablism. This shattered their previously held assumptions about the absence of oppression in society. With new first-hand experience of how society often treats disabled people, coupled with witnessing stories from other disabled people about the damage oppression causes, the participants began constructing a political activist identity. As one female participant said:

> Sport is like being in a bubble, and now I realize buffers you from what are very real daily problems most disabled people face. Yes, I had access difficulties as an athlete. But these were small in comparison to what I now face. I regularly experience people openly gawping at me, hear a lot of negative attitudes leveled at disabled people, which I thought were in the last century, am made to feel invisible or I'm really not wanted, have experienced a lot of insults and even some threats, and, well, that's the tip of the iceberg of the discrimination I face, and we face as disabled people…I thought everything by and large was fine for disabled people when I played sport. But no - how wrong I was! I couldn't have been further from the truth. The stories disabled people told me about the daily discrimination they face and how hard it is to survive shocked me, and I soon realized that my experiences since retiring were so similar. That set me on a path to where I am today, a person who still loves sport but also a person who wants to make a difference by confronting discrimination and wanting to change things so our lives as disabled people can be better. I must say too that this has had a very big, positive impact on my confidence, happiness, esteem, relationships. (Liz)

Whilst developing a new identity was not easy following retirement, the participants proposed that with the intimate knowledge of the damaging nature of disablism they now had, if they could go back in time, they would unequivocally have done several things differently whilst being an elite athlete. One of these included adopting an athletic identity, athletic activist identity, *and* a political identity. The participants also suggested that other athletes would benefit from adopting these multiple identities. This was especially so given the negative impact retirement initially had on their health and wellbeing due to not just direct social oppression, but also limited post-sport employment opportunities, psychological difficulties dealing with the loss of sport, and a reduced quality of life. As one male said:

> Retiring from competitive sport hit me psychologically. It left me struggling. I wasn't happy. I was miserable a lot. I lost a lot of confidence too. And to add to all this, I woke up in a world that I didn't really recognize…When I retired and was out of the sporting bubble I started to see the world very differently. My impairment was a route into professional sport, but now society treats me like a second-class citizen. It's left me first angry, but soon more defiant, especially when I was told, by strangers, that I'm a drain on society and would be better off dead. I wasn't going to let people off the hook and I felt I needed to do something. Battling for disability rights is now a daily part of my life, it's part of who I am now…And if I could offer one bit of advice to athletes in sport now it would be: 'Don't believe all is rosy for disabled people. It isn't. When you retire, you'll find this out pretty quickly and retirement will be even more difficult because of the discrimination we face. Retirement will be much more difficult to adjust to. Start being politically active as an athlete, or at least aware. Use your status as an athlete to bring attention to disability rights if you can…It isn't time consuming.

For instance, sending a tweet highlighting problems only takes 30 seconds.' (Ian)

Closing thoughts

Drawing on a large qualitative data set rigorously developed, this research is the first within sport and exercise psychology to explicitly examine activist identities among elite athletes with impairment. The article also contributes to research, including disability studies and the sociology of sport, by identifying two different types of activist identities disabled, elite athletes construct. Research, be it qualitative and/or quantitative, should therefore consider in the future activist identities in the plural. Interpretations were offered concerning why identities were constructed or not, when and how an activist identity was performed, and the costs and benefits to wellbeing associated with different identities. In addition, the article develops novel insights into various contemporary concerns within sport and exercise psychology as well disability studies and the sociology of sport. For example, in terms of career transition research not only was the negative impact of retirement on wellbeing for disabled people revealed (Wheeler et al., 1996). It was suggested that social oppression could increase damage to wellbeing following retirement from competitive sport. The possibilities retiring may have for developing different identities that can positively impact on wellbeing were noted too. The article moreover adds to the organizational stress literature in sport (Arnold, Fletcher & Daniels 2016). Research in this area has overlooked elite, disabled athletes. This article however suggests that disabled athletes, as a result of perceived inequalities within sporting organizations, encounter some similar stressors (e.g., leadership and team issues) to able–bodied athletes as well as distinct stressors (e.g., the lack of disability-specific coaching and inaccessible environments). Further, the article extends into research on feeling and emotion. The importance of embodied feelings for motivating the development of identity for disabled athletes was highlighted. The use of emotional regulation and various strategies in

constraining and enabling the development of activist identities was noted. It was suggested that emotions and feelings should not be subordinated to cognition or the mind. Emotion and feeling are instead often somewhat ineffable and emergent from and immanent within the flows of language and embodied social relationships.

With regard to what the participant's discourses of identity might do – the social functions -, several suggestions are proposed. Whilst athletic activist discourses offer some resistance to inequalities inside sport, what the combination of using an athlete-only identity discourse and eschewing a political activist identity may do is reproduce both a medical model understanding of disability and a 'supercrip' narrative. A medical model defines disability as any lack of ability resulting from impairment to perform an activity within the range considered normal for a person (Goodley, 2016). One problem with the medical model is that disability is depicted as abnormal, inevitably a personal physical tragedy, and every time a psychological trauma that should be overcome. Thus, being disabled is portrayed as always a 'bad' thing that must be eradicated. Another danger with the model is that any solutions to 'disability' are directed at the individual, thereby leaving social oppression unchallenged and placing the weight of responsibility onto the person to seek a 'solution' to *their* problem (Goodley, 2016; Smith & Bundon, in-press). A supercrip refers to an athlete who, with courage, hard work and dedication, proves that one can accomplish the impossible and heroically triumph over the 'tragedy' of disability through sport (Smith et al., 2016). Whilst numerous disabled athletes themselves might not see themselves as a 'supercrip', for some disabled people inside sport (Peers, 2012) as well as outside of sport (Braye, Dixon & Gibbons, 2013), the supercrip narrative provides an artificial stereotype of disability by misrepresenting the wider population of disabled people. Perhaps unintentionally too, the narrative shifts attention away from the social oppression that damages the lives of many to considering disabled people as 'tragic

653 victims' who can be 'saved' by sport and the largely able-bodied people associated with
654 para-sport Games.

655 In contrast to an athlete-only identity discourse and athletic activist identity, what
656 the discourses of a political activist identity and a disability first identity (i.e. 'I'm a
657 disabled athlete') can do is act as a counter-narrative. According to Nelson (2001),
658 counter-narratives are purposive acts of moral definition that set out to resist "and repair
659 the damage inflicted on identities by abusive power systems" (p. xiii). Acting as counter-
660 narratives, what the identity discourses of political activism and 'I am a disabled athlete'
661 do is resist disablism and circulate affirmative identities. In so doing, these discourses
662 hold great potential for evoking social change and generating positive ways of being as a
663 disabled person. What the political activist and disability first identities also may do is
664 promote a social relational model and a human rights model, thereby bolstering
665 possibilities for change and the promotion of affirmative identities. Building on the social
666 model, the social relational model proposes that disabled people can experience various
667 forms of indirect or direct social oppression that restrict activities and damage wellbeing
668 (Thomas, 2014). Encountering the social relational model can positively change how
669 people view disability and equip them with a vocabulary to further resist disablism (Smith
670 & Perrier, 2014). For instance, people can move from thinking that the 'solution' to the
671 'problem' of disability lay squarely with 'them' (the individual) to believing that society
672 produces disability. Such a move can be empowering and affirmative for people. It also
673 means that attempts to improve wellbeing, environmental structures, societal attitudes,
674 and media representations of disabled people must involve challenging disablism within
675 society. In contrast to the social relational model, the human rights model is embedded in
676 a legal convention - the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of People with
677 Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). It promotes change at a national and international

level through eight principles (e.g. disabled people have the rights to equality of accessibility) that, if implemented, helps enable disabled people to claim their rightful place in society (Smith & Bundon, in-press).

With regard to practical opportunities, one possibility lies in amplifying stories of activism. By amplifying stories we mean seeking to expand peoples' narrative resources through sharing– not prescribing but offering - different stories about activist identities and showing what each story might do. One possible way to share stories, and which currently is being discussed with disability sport organisations, is through workshops with athletes, performance lifestyle advisors, and coaches. The rationale for amplifying stories is based not just in organizational mandates to promote social missions and take care of athletes' wellbeing. It is grounded in narrative theory and research (e.g., Frank, 2006, 2010; Nelson, 2001; Pollner & Stein, 1996; Smith, Tomasone, Latimer-Cheung & Martin Ginis, 2015) along with the findings of this study. The former has suggested that in addition to stories being a highly effective way to communicate knowledge, and because narratives are emotionally engaging and compelling, narratives as subjectifiers can be useful for what Freire (2005) termed *conscientization*. Also shown to be beneficial in community based participatory action research (Schinke & Blodgett, 2016), conscientization refers to the process of breaking through prevailing assumptions and mythologies through sharing stories (and other means) to reach new levels of awareness. Stories further help constitute our identities and, as subjectifiers, can arouse imagination and act as narrative maps for possibly learning new identities. Thus, by bringing in more stories people's narrative resources can be expanded to potentially enable the construction of different identities, if people choose. In other words, by circulating different stories people's menu of narratives to artfully choose from and live by can be increased.

In terms of this study, the majority of athletes were largely unaware of the level of

oppression disabled people faced in society. They also held certain assumptions about the barriers or risks to adopting a political activist identity. In light of all this, and using stories from athletes who adopt the latter identity, narratives could be amplified in contexts like workshops that show the severity of oppression in society. The stories could also show that people may in fact be successfully involved in sport per se, strongly identify with the athlete role, and perform an activist political identity. Such amplification could counter assumptions, help conscientization, and expand athlete's awareness of different identities within disability sport so that they can develop other identities, if they choose. Given also the findings on retirement, to help with the long term care of disabled sports people it might be useful to share stories with athletes currently in sport about, for example, the damage disablism may have on lives when an athlete retires and how they might then live in personally meaningful ways. Another possible benefit of amplifying stories is that it could create spaces for athletes who are already active activists, or who may be intending to engage in activism, to discuss activist issues in safe environments where there is minimal risk of harming emotions and losing support. It may also provide opportunities to discuss concerns about engaging in activism, such as it takes much time to perform activist acts, and develop solutions to these (e.g. the use of social media like twitter).

Of course, we do not presume that athletes with a political activist identity will want to always share their stories. Equally we do not claim that all athletes with disabilities *must* take on activist identities or that people will *always* take on board new identities when stories are amplified. Whilst many stories and identities call out to be taken on board over the life course, space can be found for relatively few (Frank, 2006). Institutional norms can also govern what stories can be told and how and when these should be communicated. All this recognized, research has shown that narratives

contribute more positively to promoting different identities, producing greater affective and motivational reactions, and changing health behaviors than cognitive orientated informational messages (e.g., Falzon, Radel, Cantor & d'Arripe-Longueville, 2015; Nelson, 2001). Given this, amplifying stories of activism could expand people's menu of narrative resources to choose from, thereby potentially opening up possible selves and enabling a highly multifaceted identity. In many ways then, this work and suggested practical applications that follow embraces the call for what Gergen (2015) termed *future forming research*. Here the aim is not to simply "illuminate existing problems in society, but to devise practices that can achieve better or more viable outcomes" (p. 14). Reversing the traditional claim that science is just about what *is*, Gergen proposes that research as future forming attempts to promote 'what *might* or *ought* to be'. Given the assumptions many people in this study held, the harm to wellbeing following retirement, and suggestions from retired athletes themselves that activist political identities could be promoted more, then showing through stories what might be if certain identities are constructed or rejected seems worthwhile to pursue and investigate further.

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